

ACTION Research Living Theory



Jack WHITEHEAD & Jean McNIFF



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Introduction

This book is about the practice and theory of action research. It is written for practitioner action researchers who are committed to improving their learning, and offering explanations for how and why they are doing so. Specifically it is written for those on formal accredited courses and their lecturers, and also for those at a more advanced stage of their workplace enquiries, who wish to engage with ideas about the practicalities of doing action research, and about its theoretical underpinnings.

The book is a guide to the most pressing topics in the field, including the little addressed yet probably most urgent issue of how it is possible to assess quality in action research, so that it can generate theory whose validity can be tested against publicly communicable standards of judgement. This is especially urgent in light of many governments' policies regarding the future directions of educational research, how it should be funded, and the potential implications for education. Currently, funding for educational research tends to go to those institutions that have demonstrated quality research output. In the UK, funding goes to those with the highest grades in the national research assessment exercise. These institutions tend to be those whose research is clearly within the social sciences. The possible continuation of the social sciences as the dominant paradigm in educational research carries deep implications for the likely continued positioning of practitioners as participants in higher-education-led research, rather than researchers and theorists who are conducting their own practice-based research in their own right.

This situation is of concern, especially in light of the current increased openness to practitioner research, as demonstrated in recent funded initiatives such as the Best Practice Research Scholarships in the UK. Yet while practitioner research is generally held in high regard for its contributions to quality practice, it is not yet held in equal regard for its potential contributions to quality theory. Part of the reason is that its methods for assessing quality have not yet been fully worked out, and in some cases not even addressed. The new openness to practitioner research is therefore offset by a caution that perhaps practitioners are still not capable of doing quality research or generating theory because they are not fully conversant with the appropriate methods for judging the quality of their own work, and, given that the topic is seldom raised in the practitioner research literature, it would seem of low priority. So if practitioners themselves do not take care in addressing these core issues, the wider educational research community could be forgiven also for not taking them seriously.

The matter is now urgent, and especially so in light of this recently published statement by the 2008 Research Assessment Exercise (2005):

Where researchers in higher education have undertaken applied and practice-based research that they consider to have achieved due standards of excellence, they should be able to submit it to the RAE in the expectation that it will be assessed fairly, against appropriate criteria.

The published RAE criteria state that best quality research should demonstrate quality 'that is world-leading in terms of originality, significance and rigour'. This presents a key opportunity for practitioner researchers. The practitioner research community needs now to do serious work on identifying its own criteria and standards of judgement to show both that they know what quality means in action research and also that they are capable of articulating those standards and producing theories that stand the test of the standards in achieving originality, significance and rigour. Practitioners themselves need to define and articulate the standards of judgement they use to evaluate their own work, and make these standards of judgement available to the wider educational research community for the assessment of practitioners' accounts, so that shared agreement can be reached about how accounts should be judged on their own terms within the still dominant paradigm of the social sciences.

This book engages with these issues. We explain, through offering an account of our own action research, how we address the issues both of how we do action research, and of how we assess the quality of our own research and original theories so that we can test their validity and legitimacy against the critical scrutiny of the wider research community who read this book. We hope by doing this that we encourage public debates about what is at stake in doing action research and how its quality can be judged. We depart from conventional social science criteria and standards of judgement, and we identify new forms that, we believe, are more appropriate for judging the quality of practitioner action research, namely, the idea that we can transform the values that inspire our work and give meaning to our lives into specifically critical living epistemological standards of judgement by which we judge the quality of our living theories of practice. We explain these ideas throughout, in our usual accessible language, with copious examples of how this is already being achieved in contemporary work.

This was always meant to be a pedagogical text, in which we set out the practices and principles of action research, addressing mainly practitioners on higher degree courses or at a more advanced level in their workplace studies. Yet we have always maintained that the best way of teaching something is to show how you do it yourself. Practical examples seem to work best, and, given that action research is eminently practical, it makes sense for us to explain action research processes through the way we conduct our own action enquiries. Besides, the whole idea of action research is that the kind of theory that is most appropriate for explaining its processes is already within the practice, and emerges from the practice as the research develops. This is what we have tried to do. We have set out our own action research account, and, at the same time, commented on the process of what we are doing as we conduct our research and generate our own living educational theories. These theories are living in the sense that they are our theories of practice, generated from within our living practices, our present best thinking that incorporates yesterday into today, and which holds tomorrow already within itself.

Because this is a pedagogical text, we mix and match different voices. The main text is spoken in our shared voice as researchers, and throughout we engage you, as our

reader. In some instances, specifically in Part 2, which deals with some of the more practical issues of data gathering and generating evidence, we change to a more pedagogical voice, where we specifically offer ideas about how you can do these things for yourself. We do not tell you what to do, but offer ideas that you may wish to try out for yourself. We explain how and why they work for us, and for many others. Throughout we adopt a critical voice, where we comment on what we are doing and invite you also critically to engage with us as we tell our research story and make judgements on our own processes of communication. It is for you to decide if we manage to realize our identified standards of judgement, mainly by producing a text that is authentic and helpful. In many ways, this is an experimental text for us, yet, in our view, this is what we are about as action researchers, finding innovative ways of conducting our lives and telling our stories in a way that other people can learn.

We are always glad of feedback that helps us to modify, refine and strengthen our work. We therefore depend on you, our critical audience, to provide that feedback. Please let us know what you think. You can contact us at our e-mail addresses below. If you write, we will respond.

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Working with the text

This book contains an account of our current action research. We have written the book as our research report, and we have organized it into parts and chapters. Each chapter addresses a specific question in our action plan.

Each part introduction contains a brief overview of its content.

To provide an overview of the issues addressed in the book, here are variants of the chapter summaries. While the summaries appear at the end of each chapter, placing them here like this as a whole constitutes a summary of the book, and, we hope, will provide a guide to your reading and indicate what may be seen as the overall significance of the work.

Chapter 1 Background to our research: reasons and purposes

What are our concerns?

In this chapter we set out our research concerns and questions. These are about the future of educational research, and action research in particular. We explain that the social sciences are currently the dominant form in educational research, with their own tried and trusted methods for assessing quality. These methods position practitioners as capable of generating quality policy-informed practices but not so capable of generating quality theory. Practitioners need to remedy this situation if they are to participate in public debates about the future of evidence-based educational practices, by showing that their claims to be generating quality theory should be taken seriously. They can do this by demonstrating their competence in making scholarly judgements about their work, and by making the standards of judgement they use in assessing the quality of their own accounts available to peer action researchers and the wider educational research community. These matters need urgent attention, especially since the introduction of recent influential performance management orientations in some action research literatures that share the same epistemological values of domination and control as many of the social sciences. Our current research questions are therefore to do with how we can disrupt the epistemological hegemonies of the social sciences, accompanied as they are by performance-management-style action research literatures, by encouraging practitioners to show that they are focusing on matters of assessing the quality of their work, and making their findings available to their peer action researchers and the wider academic educational research community.

Chapter 2 Contexts of our research

Why are we concerned?

We outline some of our research contexts in this chapter. These contexts are to do with the nature and uses of theory. We explain the reasons for our concerns in relation to how theory is used to maintain the current epistemological hegemony of the social sciences. We make the case that, while we value the social sciences for their immense contributions to educational research, and draw on those contributions in our own research, we also see great value in the contributions of practitioners who are conducting their action research in their own educational settings. To make this case we explain some of the ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions of different kinds of research and theory, in terms of their underpinning values and logics. We explain that practitioner action researchers should be seen as capable of making significant contributions to quality theory, but to achieve this perception, they need to show how they engage with issues of theory and knowledge in explaining why their research should be assessed in its own terms and from within its own now established scholarly traditions.

Chapter 3 Looking for data

What experiences can we describe to show why we are concerned?

We offer as the starting point of our action research the idea that many of our values, including those of justice and democracy, could be more fully realized by the participation of practitioner action researchers in debates to do with the future of educational research. We present three case stories that describe the experiences of three practitioners whose values of justice and entitlement have similarly been denied because of the exclusion of themselves and the children they teach from public recognition as worthwhile knowledge creators and citizens. This, we suggest, is because their contributions to practice-based theories are not acceptable within normative understandings of how contributions to educational theory should be judged. We therefore introduce ideas about what new kinds of standards of judgement should be introduced and developed. We explain what these may look like in relation to our own research, and how we are articulating them in this book.

Chapter 4 Monitoring practice and gathering data

What kind of data will we gather to show the situation as it unfolds?

In this chapter we adopt a pedagogical voice alongside our scholarly voice. We explain what kind of data to look for to support claims to improved learning for improved practices. In processes of data gathering, we say, the aim is to gather data primarily in terms of the study of oneself, in order to show progress in the growth of one's own learning and how that learning can influence future learning and action. While data also need to be gathered in relation to research participants' improved learning for improved

action, those data need to be understood in relation to testing the practitioner action researcher's own claim to improved learning. We show this process in action by setting out some of the ways we gather data to test our claims that we are improving our learning in order better to encourage practitioner action researchers to raise their capacity in gathering the kinds of data that are going to help them also make quality judgements on their work. By gathering appropriate data, they will be able to generate the kind of evidence that will enable them to withstand robust critique in testing their claims to knowledge.

Chapter 5 Interpreting the data and generating evidence in relation to living critical standards of judgement

How do we explain our educational influences in learning?

In this chapter we speak about the need to generate quality evidence in support of a claim to knowledge. We outline some of the practicalities of generating evidence, explaining that evidence can be distinguished from data by showing how it stands in relation to identified criteria and standards of judgement. We then go on to set out the kinds of standards of judgement we consider appropriate for producing evidence in action research, and we suggest this in terms of the transformation of ontological values into living critical standards of judgement. Focusing on our own ontological, epistemological, methodological and pedagogical values, we explain how we transform these into living critical ontological, epistemological, methodological and pedagogical standards of judgement. By doing this, we explain how we are observing the epistemological and methodological rigour of showing how we are attending to matters of identifying appropriate criteria and standards of judgement in making evidence-based claims to knowledge.

Chapter 6 Validity, legitimacy and moral authority

How do we show that any conclusions we come to are reasonably fair and accurate?

In this chapter we show how we take care in supporting our conclusions by submitting our research findings to the critical scrutiny of others. This, we say, is an epistemologically and methodologically rigorous research process, as well as one that shows our own epistemological, methodological and moral accountability. We explain how we take Habermas's (1987) criteria of social validity as the core criteria we use in judging the quality of evidence of the educational nature of our relationships with others. We explain how the criteria contain linguistic descriptions of our embodied values, and we go on to explain how we transform them into our living critical standards of judgement. This process, we claim, helps us to achieve necessary ethical and moral validity in the production of our research account, which we believe is a core standard of judgement by which to demonstrate the ethical and moral nature of validation and legitimisation processes.

Chapter 7 The potential significance of our research

How do we show the potential significance of our research?

In this chapter we outline what we consider to be the potential significance of our research for education and educational research. We explain how we have influenced our own and each other's learning, and also the learning of others, specifically as they are members of social formations in education. The kind of influences we aim to exercise, we say, are those that encourage others to exercise their capacity for freedom and creativity. We explain that the examples we produce as evidence for these claims show how people are contributing both to new educational practices in their own settings, and also to new forms of educational theory, by showing how the practice itself can contribute to a form of practical theorizing in action. We choose specific examples of work in the UK, South Africa and China, to show how the work has implications at a global level, and how this supports our own stance as making our evidence-based claims to personal knowledge with universal intent.

Chapter 8 Case studies

How do we show the implications of our research?

The two case stories in this chapter contain ideas about how practitioner educational researchers can contribute to new social practices through undertaking their action enquiries. Working with limited financial and practical resources, both men show how, through their struggles to realize their educational-values-based visions, they have managed to inspire others in turn to achieve their own educational values. They have both managed to encourage a culture of enquiry within the social contexts of their countries' educational and cultural transformation. These stories also show the deep implications for new practices at global level. Because the stories are about managing cultural renewal through educational action research, they also demonstrate the potential contributions of action research for the creation of sustainable social orders.

Chapter 9 Evaluating the account of our research

How do we evaluate the evidence-based account of our learning?

Here we return to the theme of demonstrating the validity of our work, where we focus on issues of social validity, and we now introduce the theme of demonstrating the validity of the account of our work, where we focus on issues of textual validity. Again we draw on Habermas's (1987) social criteria of comprehensibility, truthfulness, sincerity and appropriateness in judging the validity of the evidence-based account of our own learning. As before, we explain how we transform these criteria into our living critical standards of judgement to assess the quality of our text. We go on to explore the idea that by demonstrating our capacity to make these processes transparent we are aiming to develop trust between ourselves and our audience, so that our scholarly and moral

credibility can be validated and acted upon. At this point we appeal to you, our reader, to be aware of how you are exercising your own originality of mind and critical engagement as you make judgements on the validity of our account.

Chapter 10 Into new research

How do we modify our concerns, ideas and practices in the light of our evaluations?

In this final chapter we explain how we are modifying our concerns, ideas and practices in the light of our evaluation of our research so far. We explain how we are moving into new research areas of encouraging others to show how they judge the quality of their work in relation to their identified standards of judgement. We also explain how the ideas we are exploring here are already having some influence among the practitioner action research community and in the community of academic educational researchers. While we do not ask all completely to embrace our ideas, we do ask all to give attention to the crucial issue of how they meet the standards of originality, significance and rigour as they offer their accounts of practice. Without such attention, we believe, practitioner action researchers will continue to be relegated to the ranks of good practitioners but not good theorists. With such attention, we are convinced that practitioner action researchers will demonstrate their capacity to contribute, through educational theory, to the formation of the kind of societies that are the manifestation of the values that honour and sustain humanity. With collaborative attention by both communities of practitioner and academic educational researchers, we believe that all can show the transformative potentials of the communicative action of the social formations of educational researchers who are committed to social renaissance.

PART 1

Backgrounds and Contexts

In this part we make clear that we are writing an account of our own action research, and we set out the background and contexts. We explain our reasons for the research, and we outline our purposes. We identify specific research questions, and say how we intend to address those questions. Throughout we adopt a critically reflective stance to what we are saying. *This part contains the following chapters:*

- 1 Background to our research: reasons and purposes**
What are our concerns?
- 2 Contexts of our research**
Why are we concerned?
- 3 Looking for data**
What experiences can we describe to show why we are concerned?

1 Background to our research: reasons and purposes

What are our concerns?

This chapter sets out the main issues in the current phase of our ongoing research programme. These issues are deep concerns about what is happening in educational research and educational theory, and how this is influencing thinking and practices in education and the professional education of teachers. We also set out our concerns about what is happening in action research, specifically in relation to how it is used in education. In setting out our concerns, we are giving the reasons for our research, and saying why we are doing it. We are also stating the purposes of our research, that is, what we hope to achieve.

The chapter is organized as two sections:

- 1 The current status and future of educational research
- 2 The current status and future of action research

1 The current status and future of educational research

Here is a story that sets out our concerns.

In May 2005 a seminar was organized by the British Educational Research Association (BERA) on 'The Future of Educational Research'. The seminar took place in Oxford, and was attended by delegates from around the world. Two strong themes emerged. The first was that educational research should continue to be approached via a traditional social sciences perspective. The second was about the status of practitioner action research. Delegates agreed that practitioner research was having a considerable influence in debates about the nature of pedagogy and the professional status of the teaching profession, and could indeed provide a credible alternative direction for the future of educational research. However, the issue of identifying appropriate standards for judging quality was a sticking point. The social sciences had well-established procedures for identifying what counts as quality and validity, and its very credibility as a tried and

trusted research methodology made it attractive to policy makers. While practitioner research seemed to present exciting new departures, its procedures were not yet well developed, especially in terms of making judgements about quality. There was little doubt that practitioner research was a valuable form of professional development, and, since the 1990s, governments and other bodies had shown a keen interest in practice-based research in education. Two examples of initiatives that promoted practice-based research were first, the Best Practice Research Scholarship Scheme, whereby teachers in schools are funded to explore identified aspects of practice, and second, the networked learning communities supported by the National College of School Leadership, whereby groups of teachers are brought together to share ideas about good practice and learn from one another within a context of shared collegiality. Yet while the promise of practitioner research is generally widely acknowledged, it is still bedevilled by the particular issue of what counts as quality and what kinds of standards of judgement can be used in assessing quality (see Furlong and Oancea 2005).

This situation represents our concerns too. While we value contributions from social science approaches to educational research, for reasons which we set out in the next section, we are resistant to its hegemony; and while we promote the development of practitioner research, for reasons we articulate in Section 2, we are aware of the need to develop coherent standards of judgement for assessing the quality of practitioner research. For us, showing how and why we make judgements on our work, and justifying our reasons, is at the heart of quality scholarship. Agreement needs to be reached about standards of judgement, both by practitioners as they produce their research accounts, and also by the higher education research community as they assess the quality of practitioners' accounts. These concerns about the need for quality scholarship in action research, which include articulating its processes of demonstrating judgement, give us the reasons for our current research focus, and are the main themes of this book. We are interested in what kind of standards of judgement are appropriate in action research, how they can be agreed by the practitioner action researcher community and the higher education community, and what kinds of validation and legitimisation processes are necessary for such agreement to be reached.

First, however, we need to clarify why we promote practitioner action research in the first place, and this means saying what we find in action research that we do not find in the social sciences.

Social science research and action research

We understand research as more than activity. Non-research activity is when we do things unreflectively, such as laughing or waking up, or do things in a routine manner, such as shopping. Research however is purposeful investigation, which involves gathering data and generating evidence in relation to articulated standards of judgement, in order to test an emergent theory. While research and shopping are both purposeful activities, the purposes are different. The purpose of shopping is to buy bread or milk, whereas we see the purpose of research as generating and testing new knowledge.

The main feature of social science research that distinguishes it from a living theory approach to action research is that a researcher aims to generate new knowledge (theory) about what other people are doing. They observe what other people are doing, and describe and explain those people's actions. They tend to maintain a spectator, outsider perspective